

## when everything's made to be broken; i just want you to know who i am by ceruleanstorm

**Series:** [should i stay or should i go](#); [6]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Angst, Crying, F/M, Panic Attacks, Prompt Fic, Sign Language, and the sappiest bf ever, high school fic, mike wheeler is an empath don't fight me on this

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Ambiguous or Implied Relationship(s), Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-10-02

**Updated:** 2016-10-02

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 20:36:47

**Rating:** Not Rated

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 10,059

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary:**

Mike is learning that the only thing he hates more than crying, is watching her cry. It brings a new kind of heated emotion, one that is water boiling and glass shattering and screams deafening and the worst thing in the entire world all at the same time and more. It's that moment, his back against the cabinets as he watches El sacrifice herself for him, for them, for the world and he's never been more helpless in his life. Because he wants to catch El when she falls, but he worries he's not strong enough, that the weakness that has followed him since the age of eight haunts him. She's tied together with a smile, and when she comes undone, he comes undone with her.



# when everything's made to be broken; i just want you to know who i am

## Author's Note:

the love for this series is amazing!!!! know that i love each and every one of you.

my door is always open @sstrangerthaneleven on tumblr ;)

*Prompt 9) things you said while i was crying.*

Even at the vulnerable age of six and then seven and then eight, Mike hated crying. Relented it. Despised it. He'd rather jump off another quarry than cry.

No, scratch that- he didn't hate crying, well not as much as he hated crying *in front of people*.

There was nothing more humiliating, or straight up frustrating, than standing there as Troy and James (and back in the third grade, there were more boys, older, tougher- angry scowls of boys whose names at the age of sixteen Mike can't remember- and he counts his lucky stars) called him frog face and dip shit and queer, his fingernails ripping and tearing into the skin of his palms as he balled his fist- a last ditch effort to be threatening, to be tough, to get those wastoids to leave him alone, as the hot tears rolled down his "girly freckles" and he choked, hiccuping on his own snot. Back then, it was only him and Lucas and Will, and the bullies picked them off one by one, circling like the hungry dumb vultures Nancy once showed him on a family road trip.

Lucas never cried. He was tough as James spat on his face, telling him that if they shoved him in a closet no one would ever find him because he was so dark. And Will? Mike watched as with every word, with every slur and threat, he sunk into himself, smaller and smaller and smaller, but never shedding a tear. Where Mike and Lucas fought back - or gave it their best vain shot- Will begged for them to leave, to go anywhere, that they could have what they wanted...



“Just don’t hurt my friends.” Will whispered. His voice never broke.

But Mike? Sometimes it felt like Mike felt everything too deeply, that there were emotions behind emotions- the emotions of those around him, the fear of Will’s and Lucas’ only heightening his own- slamming both fists on closed doors because *they wanted* to be felt, too. He was a heath kit to all their emotions, and he amplified every single one, even his own.. Anger twisting his tongue and sadness dancing in his chest, at eight years old Mike was never like the super spies on the Saturday morning cartoons he and Lucas always watched together, or the superheros in the comic book’s Will lent him. Their voices didn’t shake when they did the right thing or protected their friends or saved the girl (Mike relented this last thought; at the age of eight girls were mean and more importantly, *gross*) and they *didn’t* cry.

“Oh, *look*,” Troy or James- he couldn’t tell as his tears were blurring his eyesight and his struggled breathing was the only thing echoing in his ears- taunted, “Wheeler’s a crybaby! *Wheeler’s a crybaby, Wheeler’s a crybaby! Wheeler’s a crybaby!*” the boys sang, laughing loudly. Frustration enveloped him all over again. *Dammit! Dammit!* He tried wiping his eyes quickly, but the taunting continued and the stupid tears came back. Why couldn’t he make himself stop crying?

Eight years later and a long list of nameless bullies he might have forgotten, Mike still remembers running home (that was the year before his bike; he spent the next summer walking dogs and weeding gardens in the Indiana heat to save up money for a bike like the one the new boy Dustin had), the wind drying his tears, leaving his face cool but itchy, and into the arms of his waiting mother. They sat in the kitchen, where Nancy was that afternoon he can’t remember, but he does remember that it was just two of them, and they had the whole house to themselves. Mike could still smell the cookies in the oven as his mom washed the blood of his palms and cleaned his busted throbbing lip with a soft washcloth.

“Did those boys push you again?” his mom asked, putting the now red washcloth down and a hand on her pregnant belly.

Mike shook his head- or tried to, but made the tear in his lip deeper- and protested weakly, “No, I fell-”



“Michael,” his mom stopped him with one simple look, “be honest. Was it those boys?” Her voice was firm and unwavering, and Mike knew she’d catch any lie he tried. He had fallen and he’d fallen hard, onto a crack in the pavement. But he’d been pushed. It was the look on her face, the concern in her voice, that broke his facade.

Nodding, Mike burst into tears once more, uncontrollable sobs that wracked his chest and shoulders, and suddenly he was back, standing in front of Troy and James and the rest of their unruly gangs as they yelled over and over “*Wheeler’s a crybaby!*”

But then, he was smelling the cotton of his mom’s apron and her arms were protecting him, and he heard her gentle voice echo over his struggled breathing. The voices of his tormentors melted at her warm words and he was no longer shaking, trying his best to stand his ground on the concrete. He was home, his feet on the kitchen tile. He was safe.

“Oh my sweet baby boy,” she stroked his hair, and Mike felt himself able to breathe again, “you don’t know what I would do just to take this pain away, to make it so you didn’t hurt.” He cried into her apron for what seemed like forever, minutes etched into time as sobs wracked his body and he couldn’t stop wiping his nose of her apron until his brain was pounding on his skull and his cheek was covered in his own snot. Before he let go of his mom’s apron, the baby- the one that was going to be his newest brother or sister, kicked and Mike jumped, yelling out in surprise.

His mom laughed and stroked her belly, careful to avoid where Mike had blown his nose. “Did she kick you?” The debate of whether the Wheeler’s were having another boy or another girl had been on the table for weeks. Mike’s Dad insisted it was a boy, mumbling under his breath that maybe this one would be athletic, and Mike’s mom hit him over the head with the newest issue of X-Men. Passing her room one night, Mike overheard Nancy on her knees, praying for a little sister. Mike wanted a brother, someone he could teach to play Dungeons and Dragons and build legos and play with Roary and wouldn’t tease him the way Nancy always did, but his mom kissed his one day after coming back from her doctor, whispering how he would make such a good older brother and that his new little sister had such a brave and kind example to look up to.



Mike wiped the remaining snot on his jacket sleeve, and nodded.

"She's worried about you." his mom smiled, but Mike shook his head.

"She's just a baby. What does she know?"

It was his mom's turn to shake her head. "You know, Michael, when I was pregnant with you," Mike made a face, but she kept on, "you would always kick when I was feeling sad. It was like your way of checking on me." She smiled, taking her son's face in her hands, drying the rest of his tears.

"Mom," he hiccuped.

"Yes?"

"Do you think I'm a crybaby?"

The question hung in the air for a few patient seconds before his mom's face twisted in confusion. "A what? A crybaby? Why- why would I think that?"

Mike sighed, the action easing the pain in his head and in his chest. "Because... because... I cry a lot." He mumbled the last words, unable to look at her so he could watch her face, her reaction.

"Oh, Michael, is that what they were teasing you about?" She asked.

"They weren't at first," Mike bit his lip, hiccuping again. "They were just calling us names and we were yelling at them to stop, but they weren't and then they pushed."

"You?" She stroked his cheek.

"Well. yeah, but they also pushed Will and tried to push Lucas and I guess it just got to be too much."

"Crying is not a bad thing, Michael. Everyone cries." She lead him by the shoulder gently to the kitchen, pulling out a stool so he could sit before taking one of her own.

"No," Mike shook his head, hard, ignoring the pain in his tearing lip,



“Lucas never cries and Will doesn’t ever cry either.”

“Michael-”

“None of the other boys at school cry. And Nancy never cries, and she’s a *girl* and girls always cry!” As he spoke, the lump in his throat made it harder and harder too. And he started to feel like he was going to start crying all over again.

His mom shook her head, clicking her tongue and sighing. “Oh, my baby boy. It’s not a bad thing to cry, and I *promise* you, I promise you that those boys they’ve cried before and that Nancy has cried before.”

“They never cry in front of people.” mumbled Mike. Mike wanted to believe her, wanted to believe the other boys and his sister feel emotions they way he does- the overwhelming way they take over him, the way he can never turn off his feelings like his friends did. “*Sensitive*” is the word they used to describe him and his quiet meltdowns, “*Michael Wheeler is such a sensitive boy*”, the adults sighed, shaking their heads, their words full of an Adult sadness he doesn’t understand but recognizes (thanks to his sensitivity), “*The world will ruin that,*” the adults whispered behind his back.

The adults said “sensitive” in such a way that it confused eight year old Mike, mingling in his head when his mom sitting there at the table, told him, “You have a big heart, Michael. You wanted to protect your friends and yourself and you got frustrated. Sometimes that big heart of yours doesn’t know how to handle all you’re feeling and it needs a way to get it out. It needs a way to get all the bad out, because Michael, *you’re good.*”

*But I am not brave*, sixteen year old Mike remembers thinking, *I’m not brave if I cry.*

“So I cry?” Mike asked, his face twisting, and his mom laughed softly, a sweet sound echoing off the kitchen tiles.

“Yes. And that’s okay, don’t let anyone ever tell you it’s not.” She smiled. Mike let out a shaky breath, the kind that always steadied him after these awful hours spent fighting tears. He won’t admit it to her or to anyone for a long, long time, but crying made him feel



better. And it would a be long time- he'd battle emotions so much stronger than the ringing in his ears as Troy and James read their list of nicknames off, emotions like loneliness, indescribable paralyzing fear, and desperation and so much *anger*...and heartbreak- before Mike would accept how sometimes it was easier to let his emotions play through than to try and swallow them like tears.

Mike's mom let him use the wooden spoon to dig out the leftover cookie dough out of the bowl, and he spent that afternoon with his mom as they wait for the kitchen timer to ring and the real cookies and glasses of milk. She listened as he talked about how Will and Lucas are going to let him be Dungeon master for their first real game and he told her all about the volcano he wants to make for the science fair, and eventually, the ache that crying, that his overwhelming frustration has brought, in his chest faded away into simple exhaustion, but he doesn't tell his mom that. She'll worry, he knows. But he does ask her in a soft, almost embarrassed voice, why the Adults call him sensitive.

Her eyes widen at this, causing her to drop her spoon. "Why do they say it, you know, like it's a bad thing?" Mike repeated his question.

"Did you know your grandmother was a lot like you?" Mike's mom ignored the question, instead taking his hands. "She was always so fierce in her emotions and when people would make her upset, and she would tell them as much, they called her sensitive." She paused and wiped some of the cookie dough off of his cheek. "And she was, but in the best way. Your grandmother had a way of knowing when people were sad or hurting, and she never gave up on people. She always went with her instinct. I'm not sure how she knew this, but once I got lost in the woods. I had just gone out to play by the river, but it had dried up during a drought and I couldn't use it find my way back to the house...Once it started to get dark, I thought everyone had forgotten about me, so I sat by this old tree stump and started to cry, and she was there a few minutes later and took me back. Years later she told me she went looking for me because she had a bad feeling in her stomach and acted on it. She wore my emotions as if they were her own, she wore everyone's. And you do to, my baby boy. That's not something everyone has, Michael. Nancy doesn't have it, and your dad doesn't have it. So you're kind of like."



The sadness suddenly lifted off Mike's chest, and something like hope filled him. "Like a superhero?" he asked, interrupting but his excitement had taken over.

Mike's mom let out another laugh. "Yes, Michael. Sort of like a superhero."

As they sat at the kitchen table, the ambient yellow light engulfing everything in Mike's memory from that point on, Mike grows. Holly Ramona Wheeler is born only a few Sundays a later, and it's not long before he's lining up cheerios on the living room carpet for to bribe her to crawl to him and then to walk to him and to say her first word "Baba." The sun sets outside the kitchen and Mike and Will and Lucas are hanging out with the new boy Dustin who doesn't have any teeth but always hoards Smarties in his jacket pocket. It's more meat for the vultures, but another person for D&D and they kick off their campaigns officially. The timer rings and Mike's mom pulls the cookies out of the oven, letting him have his pick of the biggest on the hot pan; the bullies never quit, never stop circling, and there will be more times where Mike's emotions, his sensitivity take over brutally, and he's crying in front of them again, but there will also be a time where he's growing a suit of armor, learning strength from his friends. He cries less and less and less, but reacts still to his own emotions like a spark to gasoline. Quick to learn, Mike finds channeling his enthusiasm and energy into campaigns and science and school and his friends. Things like that don't make his stomach hurt or his head ache. And when he does cry, weak moments far and in between, he always feels better, just like his mom promised, feels lighter and less sick, the feeling of relief closer than it seemed. Like the way he remembers the taste of chocolate and of milk, he remembers the words of his mother. At the age of eight, in his kitchen helping his mom dry the dishes, the ache of his lip finally fading, he likes he superpower, likes the idea of knowing when people are sad or hurting or afraid.

But at the age of twelve, the amber sunset has bled into blues that fight the orange lights by the kitchen window- and something changes.

And it changes with her.



He can't, even to this day, explain how he knew she was in trouble. Instinct takes over, this girl who is called a number and doesn't know the word friend or promise. She's a closed book, one strange intricacy after another, but he wants to read her, wants to know her better. The longer she's with him, the more rain sounds like thunder. He picks up on her emotions as if he were her strongest receiver to the heath kit she sits aflame trying to find Will. She's tired, she's annoyed, she's scared, she's angry, she's brave- and he knows because he's tired, he's annoyed, he's scared *out of his mind*, he's angry like never before, and he's brave. He wears her emotions like she wears his old blue jacket. Mike's never paid attention to girls before, but suddenly she's standing in front of him and he blinks but can't the image of her as she takes on Troy, saves him from his own stupid fall (but he's falling fast and won't realize it until a few years later, and when he does it's so much scarier than the echoes of the quarry) and he's telling her she's glad she's home. For once in his life, his sensitivity is a pro in a minefield of cons, because now he has her.

If only for a few moments.

Mike hasn't cried in years (he's back in his mom's arms and fighting angry tears after they pull Will's "body" out of the quarry lake out of frustration and bitter sadness and denial), not like this. Not when she doesn't answer when she calls out his name.

"El!" he screams, the familiar lump in his throat accompanied by a numbness he can't describe. Because he's never known anything like it. He's never known anything like her. But he blinked, and missed it, and now she was gone. "Eleven!"

This time when he cries, long and hard, his shoulders shaking and knuckles white but he doesn't notice, it doesn't make him feel better. It just makes him empty.

Mike blames his sensitivity- and sometimes thanks it- when he tricks himself into thinking she's still somewhere. Still trying to reach out for him.

1984 passes, and the sunrises, the new day can be seen from the kitchen's many windows, and he's healing like the scabs on his hands from his own fingernails but leaving scars because he picks at them



over and over. There are moments on a quiet Christmas and a warmer than usual March where tears slip sometimes, but he sits in the blanket fort, and knows he can feel her and can't bring himself to cry. But he blinks again and she's on the Byers' porch dirty and disoriented and home. Back in Hawkins. Back with him.

And he and his stupidly intense emotions and sensitivity don't know how to handle it, and so he sits outside the little hospital room they've taken her to and lets the tears- the real tears- he's been holding back for so long fall. *She's home*, he tells himself over and over again because he can't fathom it's real. He pinches his wrist to make sure. *El came back*.

The connection that began the moment El refused to let him shut the door the night they found her, soaking and cold, only grows stronger. She's tentative at first, skittish and it makes him skittish, and he's picking up on all her emotions like radio waves just like before. At first there's only static, but then there's sound.

At the age of sixteen when he's been lucky enough to spend four years with her, with his best friend (he pinches his wrist again. Did she really say yes that November afternoon- her birthday- when he asked her out? The smile that lights up her face when she says yes- because she did say yes!-Mike thinks is the prettiest thing in the world. He rides his bike home that night in a happy trance, and Lucas and Dustin lose it when he crashes into a pole.) he's fallen off a different kind of ledge, and he's fallen hard.

Mike knows so many emotions. He knows his own like the back of his hand and he knows her like the lines and scars on his palms. But he doesn't know how to handle love- that dangerous word he thinks as he sits at the other end of the room, watching El teach Holly how to dance, spinning around in her brand new dress, and falling into laughter. And there she is all of a sudden, in front of him and smiling her beautiful smile at him. She extends her hand, saying they should show Holly "how it's done"- her new favorite phrase he's taught her- and he takes it and swallows the words I love you, his own personal Demogorgon, for another time. Because this moment, and not stepping on her bare feet, is the most important thing in the world, in any dimension or universe. Because he's not ready to the hit quarry water and he's not sure if she'll catch him this time.



Still Mike is learning that love is so many emotions to be just labeled as one: happiness, wonder, hope, strength, bravery, vigilance, patience, her smile, her laugh, her voice... He's learning love is not an emotion easy to feel, but addicting all the same.

And Mike is learning that the only thing he hates more than crying, is watching *her* cry. It brings a new kind of heated emotion, one that is water boiling and glass shattering and screams deafening and the worst thing in the entire world all at the same time and more. It's that moment, his back against the cabinets as he watches El sacrifice herself for him, for them, for the world and he's never been more helpless in his life. Because he wants to catch El when she falls, but he worries he's not strong enough, that the weakness that has followed him since the age of eight haunts him. She's tied together with a smile, and when she comes undone, he comes undone with her.

But the age of eight, the sun has a far distance to travel before it sets, and Mike is far away but closer than he thinks to promises of first love, and he sat at the kitchen table with his mom, and whispered, "I'm sorry I got snot all over you."

"It's okay, Mike." His mom laughed. "It will wash."

And it does.

-

"If you drop this on me, Lucas, I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

"You're the one leaning it on *me*, you dumbass!"

From his place in the corner of the room, Mike snorts. He haphazardly folds another chair out, counting the growing row as he goes. Beside him, Will is counting how many times in the past hour alone Lucas has called someone a dumbass.

This afternoon the four have been designated as free manual labor for the Chief and Will's mom's upcoming wedding, setting up chairs and tables for rehearsal dinner, that is still a week away. But the wedding



is making every adult in their lives unbearable- “This has to be done!” “Oh, we still need to go here!” “That’s not the right color!” “Which one of us was making the cake again?”- and Mike has run out for rounds of flour for the past four nights, his mom trying to get the even the *practice* wedding cakes perfect. Setting up a week before the actual thing serves a fail safe, just in case anything goes wrong between point A and point B.

And the boys, having lived most of their lives there, know that Hawkins has it’s own kind of Murphy’s Law. Anything that could go wrong in this town, *will* go wrong in this town.

The pull up on their bikes (despite being sixteen and the oldest, Mike still doesn’t have a car and everyone makes their complaints about this very loudly known when it starts raining.) to the old Senior Center, the new one having been moved, the police station has rented out for their Chief’s reception. El is waiting for them under a caving pavilion, sitting on the steps and hugging her knees, wearing a yellow sundress and one of his old rain jackets. Her face (her complexion is a little paler than usual, he notices swallowing. Worry envelopes him instantly, but not before he’s picking up on her scattered emotions) lights up when she spots them coming toward her, slowly picking herself off the steps as the boys brake and Mike throws his bike on the ground.

His hand is hers in seconds. El’s grip is tighter than usual, as if she is using him for balance. Heart skipping a beat, he runs his thumb over her freezing knuckles (he’s been teasing her about her supernatural cold hands for the past few weeks and it’s become an inside joke between them, one where he complains and her answer is to place her palms on his cheek) praying it will steady her. She feels all over the place and he needs to bring her back to the center.

“So that’s where that went.” Mike jokes, trying to get her attention, tugging on her sleeve of the raincoat that used to be his. Underneath, the light of the early lit street lamp catches a streak of silver from the charm bracelet he bought he for her birthday, which she fumbles with for a few seconds before looking at Mike.

He expects her to serve his own banter back with some witty- well not witty- but El worthy response, but she bites her lip and answers



in the ghost of her own voice “I can give it back if you need it.”

“Huh?” Mike repeats. It was the last thing he was expecting; his stomach drops to ground when suddenly she is gripping his hand tighter even and leaning on his arm more. His eyes fall to her nose, checking for any sign of blood, and finds none. “No, no- El, it’s fine. Keep the jacket, okay? For me.”

Leaning her head on his shoulder, El shivers and cold traces up Mike’s back. He squeezes her hand. Relief floods him when she squeezes back and he whispers, “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes.” El mumbles, but the jingling of her bracelet gives away that her other hand must be shaking. Mike knows her. And he knows her hands shake when she lies. She doesn’t whisper promise either at the end, their word- Mike’s closest attempt at those three words but so much more.

He kisses the top of her forehead and is about to ask what is going on, when his friends make their presence remembered.

“How did you forget *all* of our bike locks, Dustin?” yells Lucas from somewhere behind them.

“I dunno, Lucas! I’ve been kinda of busy lately! I can’t remember petty details like locks and shit.”

“Yeah, so? We’ve all been busy.” Lucas retorts. Mike knows that they’re all not in the mood for this. Bringing in heavy collapsible tables and two hundred chairs should be a *blast*. “Dumbass!”

“And so it begins! We haven’t even made it to the building!” Will laughs, patting Lucas on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it Dustin, they’re in the rain anyway, and who goes bike stealing in the rain?”

Mike hears Dustin sigh dramatically. “Yeah, well, we wouldn’t have to even leave our bikes in the rain if *somebody had a freaking car!*”

“Drop it, Dustin!” Mike yells back, and El flinches on his shoulder. Inwardly he curses Dustin, but mostly himself. Who’s the dumbass now?



Will sighs and the three step up onto the pavilion as Will swings open the door.. “Let’s just get started, okay? Look at it this way, the quicker we start and the less time we spend yelling at each other the quicker we can all go home. Hey El! What are you doing here? I thought you were staying home with home to help hem the dresses?”

El snuffles, head still on his shoulder, and he squeezes her hand. “I’m bad at sewing.” El mumbles, lgaze on her shoes..

“Oh.” Will lifts an eyebrow, but shrugs after exchanging a look with Mike. “Well, glad you’re here. We could use the extra help.”

“Yeah, with a telekinetic this will go twice as fast!” Dustin cheers. It’s meant to be funny, but Mike bites his tongue in irritation. Can’t they see she might not be in the mood? There are dark circles under her eyes and she’s leaning on Mike so much he thinks she’ll fall asleep right there and she’s so pale... He blinks and they’re back there, the cafeteria and he’s tripping over his words like an idiot, making promises the universe is hellbent on breaking, and then he’s losing her all over again, she’s paler than snow and weaker and stronger than she’s ever been, her pained screams echo in his ears over the shrieks of a dying monster and-

El is sniffing on his shoulder and Lucas rolling his eyes as he walks backwards, all cool guy, into the building. “You two aren’t planning to make out the whole trip, right? Because you’re going to help with this, or else.”

Mike rolls his eyes, leading El into the building. But as he sees all the tables stacked up right in carts waiting for them and about a thousands stacks of chairs, he think he would rather be kissing El instead (but that was most of the time) but right now he would rather be doing *anything else*. He’s not exactly a skinny weakling anymore, but he’s lifting more physics textbooks than he is weights nowadays (like he’s ever gonna lift weights, he laughs to himself) and even looking at the tables and chairs brings on the exhaustion in his muscles Mike knows he’ll be feeling tomorrow. El, on the other hand, has no interest in using her powers to help move tables or chairs. Mike is not surprised she has asked Joyce for another job after failing to sew, and will be spending the afternoon as the boys drop heavy things on their feet in the next room arranging centerpieces for the



reception. Mike is more than relieved gluing fake flowers with a hot glue gun is something El won't need her powers for, but still he makes an attempt to follow her when she leaves.

"Where are you going?" she whispers when he doesn't let go of her hand. There's panic in her eyes. She looks back at him and then back at the door, taking her fingers away from his.

"With... you..."

El shakes her head. "You need to stay. Help the others."

Mike open his mouth to protest, and El lowers her eyes and head by a few degrees."Mike. I'm fine." Mike gulps, a little upset that his girlfriend doesn't want him to follow and wants that enough to use her gifts to make him stay away, but it's nothing like the burning in his stomach, a back handed slap that she won't tell him what's wrong. Why she is standing smaller than usual. Why she's reverted back to simple sentences.

"C'mon loverboy! Time to set up tables." Mike's hand is yanked from El's when Lucas yanks his hood back, and he watches her take her chance to flee to the other room. It takes every drop of willpower in him not follow her, to fight the mounting feeling in his gut.

It's been a quiet fifteen minutes he doesn't chase El, and he pushes the feeling down as the time passes unfolding chair after chair after chair (they decide, after Will and Mike drop one of the tables on Dustin's barefoot "Why'd you take your shoes off, you dumbass?" "And that's one!"- that the skinnier pair of the four should just put out chairs and Dustin and Lucas would do the "heavy lifting") until the feeling has dissipated completely.

"It's tipping! It's tipping! *It's tipping! SHIT SHIT-*" with a grand *BOOM*, Dustin jumps out of the way and the table hits to carpeted floor, shaking the building and making Will jump and hit his shin on one of the chairs.

"Look what you did, Dustin!"

"Jesus, Lucas you're the one who pushed it this way!"



“No, you were pulling the table towards you like a dumbass!”

“And that’s thirty-seven.” Will announces, rolling his eyes and rubbing his shin. Mike begins to feel a blossoming of pain in his own shin just by watching his friend.

“You okay?” Mike gestures to his shin and Will shrugs.

“I’m fine. It’ll probably bruise, but that’s going to be nothing compared to what cleaning the blood up after these two murder each other.” going back to his stack of folding chairs, Will shrugs again.

“They’re not going to murder each other.” there’s assurance in Mike’s words, but a hidden because I’m going to murder them first if they keep this up. He, despite his promise to his girlfriend only got about a three hours of sleep the night before. Rationalizing he hasn’t broken any promises by telling himself she made him promise not to work on his honors physics homework until dawn and then try to brave the school day with coffee and shit ton of aspirin, but that he was actually up because Zoe, his corgi, decided to sleep horizontally in the middle of his bed and eventually he gave up trying to push her off and just resigned himself to floor.

Sighing, Mike watches Lucas and Dustin repair their friendship enough to argue about picking the table back up again. He knows he’s not the only one sleep deprived. With a week until Jonathan arrives back from New York or wherever the hell he and Nancy were off “not getting engaged” in the tired words of his mother, it was only Will, his mom, and El to put together the wedding on their end of the things. El had mentioned an art project he’d been pulling all nighters on for the reception late one night of the phone with Mike, banging on the bedroom wall as a reminder his music was too loud. Dustin and Lucas were most definitely sick of each other’s faces and voices too; the school’s production of Les Miserables had closed a weekend ago, and Dustin and Lucas kissed their stage manager and light tech jobs goodbye.

But with the play, Mike thinks to himself as he takes another stack of chairs from the rack, nobody had come this close to committing murder in the first degree. Mike, El and Will had had very little involvement with the play up- Mike dying of honors physics and



English, Will and El too reserved to be a part of something with so much grandeur, and none of them talented enough - until a few weeks before opening night. Using his superhuman charm, Dustin convinced Lucas help him behind the scenes, -and by persuaded Mike knew paid him fifty dollars- and Lucas begrudgingly ended up working lights. And then he fried the light board, and Mike found himself stuck in the auditorium after school bent over the piece of stage equipment rewiring it in hopes of revival. Paint brushes under his arm and a sketchbook full of elaborate designs for the barricades, Will showed up a day later to help Dustin paint set pieces and work on backdrops, El had tagged along, helping Dustin with odd jobs and cleaning dressing rooms and organizing set pieces. Mike's whole world became sharper in color and his shoulders ten pound lighter when she skipped in through the auditorium doors with her soon to be stepbrother. At some point in the infinite afternoon, Mike had burned his thumb on an open wire, and there she was, bent over him, her long pretty brown hair falling her face with a bag of ice wrapped up in a damp paper towel.

Then she was there the rest of the afternoon, laying on her back and reading out of the light board's manual to guide him through the board's mess of wires and knobs, punching him in the shoulder whenever he said something stupid to make her laugh. But she always laughed.

"You wanna take a stab at this?" he asked, gesturing to the board and the snakes of wires currently engulfing his left hand.

El propped herself on her elbows and grinned. "It's not a radio of any kind, mouth breather. Unless you want me to set it on fire."

"You know what?" he laughed even as another wire shocked his wrist. He pulled back immediately and she was right there, taking his hand to inspect the burn. "When this musical is over, *please* set this thing on fire for me."

Laying back down, still holding his injured hand, she giggled. "Promise."

"Thank you for using your powers for good." Mike laughed with her. He leaned over and kissed her nose, her pretty face scrunching up as



she smiled.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me about the French Revolution.”

They waste away those next rehearsal afternoons as he tells her about the bloodiest moment of history he’s been made to write essays on (suddenly proud he did his research and didn’t half ass the paper), preparing her for the play they’d watch the Saturday evening. Time melted away, Lucas and Dustin not at each other’s throats but yelling all the French puns they could think of across the stage until the actors were begging them to stop, Will not tired and playing constant compromiser but emerging from backstage covered in red paint, running back and forth to the art because he needed more. El vibrantly smiling and brimming with questions about Marie Antoinette and Victor Hugo, keeping him company, her good mood bleeding into his own.

It’s one of those moments the five of them have never felt closer, and Mike’s burns and the red paint Will is still digging out of his fingernails become worth it, because Saturday night’s performance is the most amazing thing they’ve seen in so long. But it’s not without its own stumbles; Lucas is still having problems with the light board on the night of the dress rehearsal, Mike in his tuxedo and El in her bright red dress are running to the convenience store and twenty minutes before the curtain opens having forgotten to buy flowers for Dustin, and the actor who was supposed to be playing Javert (already a understudy) calls in sick ten minutes before and Dustin has to take up his roll and call out cues. The curtain opens and El holds Mike a little closer through the most of the painful parts of the play (and they’re quick to learn that that’s most of the play) and Mike holds his breath, praying nothing happens with the lights. Dustin’s performance has all three of them clapping and standing and even El shouting, and by the end of the night, if all three of them have tears in their eyes, no one says anything because El is already running backstage and throwing herself and a bouquet of roses at Dustin as Will and Mike pat him on the back and Lucas is strutting down from the booth oozing pride because he didn’t “fuck anything up” and



Dustin now owes him fifty dollars.

But that moment is over, Mike laments, starting on a new row of chairs. They're back to Dustin and Lucas yelling at each other (he'd give anything for the puns back) and Mike takes one look at Will leaning on the wall across the room and knows he's probably going to pass out out of pure exhaustion.

"Just pick it up, you guys." Mike yells, breaking up the escalating fight between his friends. What they wouldn't all give for a nap. His super power means sensing the tension in the room like a shadow hell bent on choking him. It means sensing their own levels of irritation and suddenly being irritated even more. It means he'd throw a chair across the room just to not pick up on the antipathy like a TV remote picking up on a fritz signal from the television set.

"How many more of these stupid things do we have to go?" laments Lucas. He and Dustin start on picking up the table they've shaken the building's foundation with, and Will lets out a loud sigh from the other end of the room.

"I think..." he pauses to count the remaining tables, "about twenty."

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas all let out a collective groan; it's already been the longest hour of their lives, and they've just been doomed to be there another.

"That's *it*." Dustin throws his hands up in the air. "I'm going down the street to get some McDonald's. Anybody want anything?"

"Gross." Mike shivers and Lucas adds a vomiting sound for effect.

"Your loss." shrugs Dustin, heading out, but not before asking Will if he wants anything.

"Get me the largest caffeinated soda they have." he mumbles, eyes closed and still leaning against the wall.

"Largest caffeinated soda, got it."

"And chicken nuggets." Will adds with a yawn.



“And chicken nuggets, okay-” but Dustin stops. They all stop when a sickening crack reverberates through the walls of the over room, echoing in the hall. The other room. Mike’s entire body freeze and panic turns his hands ice cold and stops his heart. He only has one thought.

*El!*

In the millisecond before Mike’s feet take off toward her, he has to freeze again when it’s Dustin who calls out, “Hey, El! Everything okay in there?”

Mike shakes his head and counts to ten. Calm down. It could be nothing. You trust her, don’t you? It’s probably nothing, Mike lies. But he blinks and he can still see the Demogorgon, it’s angry aggrieved screams etched forever into his memories, his nightmares as it bursts through the wall of his middle school with crack, crack, crack, hungry for the blood El has spilled in her moment of emancipation.

He blinks, and it’s an infinity of seconds before they hear her small voice call back. “Yes.”

Mike breathes again, but there is a mounting feeling in his stomach. One he knows all too well. One that he has been burned before for ignoring.

“Do you want anything from McDonald’s?” Dustin yells to El. Lucas rolls his eyes and calls Dustin a dumbass under his breath, and this time, Will is too tired to count how many Lucas is up to.

Another infinity of seconds of holding his breath, of time standing still, before “No, thank you.”

It’s good enough for Dustin, who repeats Will’s order one last time for confirmation before disappearing, but not good enough for Mike and that mounting feeling. He’s off, hands in his pockets, straight for the other room, straight for her.

“Um, where do you think you’re going?” Lucas stops him in his tracks. Mike bites his tongue. He knows exactly what’s coming. “We



still have to finish this.”

Mike whirls around. “I’m just going to check and make sure everything’s okay.” The longer he stands there, the worse the feeling gets. The more his heart beat turns to static and the louder that static gets.

“She said she’s fine, Mike.” Lucas rolls his eyes. From behind them, Mike can hear Will begin to snore.

Lucas is wrong. Lucas is a lot of things. Smart. Strong headed. Logical. Grounded in reality where Mike is not. Where Lucas relies on the facts he’s gathered (and Mike can’t dispute this when it’s saved their asses on multiple occasions) and goes with what’s in front of him, Mike relies on his instinct. He relies on the invisible string he was born with, the one he inherited from his grandmother, to pull him through the darks woods to the answer. And Mike knows that what he is feeling is his instinct pulling him to her, like it always has.

He knows something is wrong. Not just wrong, but very wrong.

“I know.” Mike nods in affirmation, doing everything he can to take the edge out of his voice. “I’ll be back in a sec, just chill out until then.”

Lucas lets out another dramatic sigh, but doesn’t stop Mike from leaving the room. *Good*, Mike thinks. *He won’t understand*. And it’s not that it’s a bad thing. No one really understands how his emotions, as explosive and impulsive as they make him, never lie to him. They blind him, but he can’t explain to people like Lucas that he can’t see without him.

“Man, Will, you have the right idea.” Mike hears Lucas mumble before he turns the hallway and pushes the door to the smaller foyer open.

“El?”

The first thing he’s met with is a sea of porcelain. Beneath him, shards and shards of what he thinks might have been as vase, cover the grout and tile. This must have been what they had heard. It must



of fallen off the counter, the next thing he notices, covered in purple and blue fake flowers and strands of abandoned ribbon. He see's her next, and he's flooded with panic that is not precisely his own.

El has backed herself into a corner, as far as she can from the vase. Her brown eyes are staring at the mess of color and shine and they are wide with fear. Her snow white skin is now a shade of green, and she steadies herself on the counter with one shaky hand.

"El?" he tries her name again. *Please let her not be having a flashback. Please, anything but that. She's been doing so well, I don't understand, she was fine an hour ago-* but she wasn't, he realizes. She was closed off and simple sentence Eleven, not the happy vibrant talkative who lay at his side and read him directions from the manual in funny voices to make him laugh. She was pale, holding on to him as if she would fall. And she lied. "El?"

"Mike?" his name is a whisper on her lips, her eyes don't meet his, locked on the mess on the floor. Mike tries taking a breath, tries to keep his own shaking knees under control. The more he loses control of his emotions, the less he can keep track of hers.

"What happened?" he whispers, starting to cross the sea to her.

She swallows. El is shaking more, the closer he comes. "I broke it."

"Oh. Yeah. But that's okay, it's just a vase." Mike has reached her now, trying to take her free hand but she seizes it back. El shakes her head. Relief floods through him; she's reacts, she's reacting, she's here with him in the present, not trapped in her past and breaking walls to get free. He can still reach her then. He expects her at any moment to sign, a technique they've learned together so she can explain what is wrong when she has attacks, but she shakes her head, and to his astonishment, speaks.

"No. Not just a vase. Joyce's favorite." her voices hitches and it's killing Mike. El won't even look at him.

"She'll understand. It was an accident." Gently, and slowly, he puts a hand on her shoulder. He wants to hug her, to hold her pieces together because she looks like she's going to break into a million



shards in only a few seconds. But she's flinching at his contact. "El? El, *please* look at me." And when it's his voice that breaks, he can feel something break in him, in her. Mike knows then it's so much more than a vase.

She looks up at him, and her eyes fill with tears. "Couldn't catch it." Bringing her hands up to her eyes, to let everything go, sobbing as hard as he's ever seen her. Mike stands frozen in the moment as she falls to her knees, her cries crescendoing until she is almost screaming, bending his heart, breaking it.

"Couldn't catch it." she half hiccups, half screams and he's on the floor with her after falling to his own knees. All the pain the world couldn't hurt him, not like this.

Mike brings her into his arms, and El doesn't flinch, she just melts into him, sobbing into his shoulder and clutching his shirt with white knuckled fingernails and muffled screams. Anger, sadness, fury, self hate, guilt, his body can't stay on one emotion, because she can't stay on one emotion.

He hears the words of his mother, from all those kitchen nights ago. "*Oh my sweet baby boy... You don't know what I would do just to take this pain away, to make it so you didn't hurt.*" Mike had thought it was just something that mothers said to hurt children, that it was something he would understand when he had kids, but right now, he understands it with more clarity than ever. This isn't her tearing up at Fantine's death in the play and him squeezing her hand and kissing her forehead. This is her shattering into a million pieces in his arms, days- weeks- years worth of *something* pushed her to this breaking point.

"El." He whispers as she cries. He doesn't know at what point he's started rocking her back and forth. The tendrils of panic envelope his lungs; Mike has no idea what to do, the feeling of helplessness, watching her disappear before his eyes, has stolen his ability to think. His mom would know what to do. So Mike keeps rocking her, stroking her hair and whispering her name like it's a prayer, because for so many years, since that night against the cabinets, it has been. "El, El, El," he whispers softly. "You don't know what I would do. To make this pain go away. To make it so you would never have to hurt again,



ever. I'd take it all away if I could and I'd -I'd do it for you, but I- I can't and I'm so sorry, El. I'm so sorry."

The last words come out hoarse, and she starts to cry harder and harder. He's holding onto her just as tightly as she clings to him. "Mike." El sobs, her voice breaking. He holds her tighter. "I'm sorry."

"No, El! Don't be sorry, please, this isn't your fault. *None* of this is your fault!" he lifts up her face as gently as he can, but he needs her to look at him. Her eyes are red and puffy and swollen, her lips tainted with blood. She reaches out for him, slowly caressing his cheek before her shoulders fall and the tears escape her once more.

She's back in his arms, sobbing once more into the crook of his neck. Mike doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how. Only two weeks before they were getting lost on the train tracks and El was making him promise to get some sleep. *She* was the one taking care of him.

Her words from that endless afternoon come back to haunt him. "*It's okay. You need sleep. And I didn't get any sleep last year either so we'll just sleep now.*"

"El, are you sleeping? At all?" he's running his fingers through her hair, an action that he wants to believe is calming her down. Mike feels El shake her head. She holds up her hands, quickly signing a word he knows is coming. Nightmares. He takes a shaky breath, matching her choked sobs.

"Is it... is it the bad men? What they did to you?" Anger shakes him down to the core when she nods into his shoulder. It hurts him to talk about and he tries imagining what it would be like to be haunted by it in his dreams.

"The- the-" Mike can't finish his sentence. He has tears in his own eyes now, and all he can do is go through the motions of what has become their sign for the Upside Down. And she nods again. Mike balls his fists, the familiar tear of his finger nails breaking skin, fighting the urge to hit the floor repeatedly.

*She doesn't deserve this*, he wants to scream. Scream it at the rest of



the world that is out for her blood, out to steal her happiness. *Haven't you stolen enough from her already? Haven't you made your goddamn point?!*

He has no idea he's going to be repeating this through flared nostrils and angry tears for the rest of this life, because all Mike can taste right now is this moment. All he can taste is red rage. All he can know is her heartbreak, it's all he can feel as the room fades away around them. He won't be able to say later how long they knelt there in each other's arms, her sobs echoing in his ears and his fingers in her hair. He won't be able to say if it ever got easier in that small room, but at some point her cries turn to whimpers and her whimpers fade into soft shaky breaths. El loosens her grip around his shirt, and their hands find each other, fingers intertwining.

Mike doesn't stop rocking her, not for a long time, and it's still a while before he asks "Is it the wedding?"

Lifting herself off him just enough to look at him, she takes a deep breath and Mike feels the tension melt from his shoulders just by watching her. "Maybe. It's really stressful, on Joyce and on Hopper. On Will. They yell and fight a lot. I want it to be over. The preparations." El signs as she speaks, and Mike pays just as much attention to her hands as he does to her words. He knows she finds this easier; speaking if she can sign, using the silent form of speaking as a crutch.

Out of habit, he signs his spoken words as well. "Is that why you didn't tell them about your nightmares?"

El nods, letting out another shaky breath and wiping her nose on his jacket sleeve. Mike throws his head back. It's not that he's frustrated at her, but more that he's frustrated because El can't wrap her head around the idea she's part of their world now; she's worth taking care of. He's about to remind her of such, but then her cold palm is on his cheek, making him jump.

"You're crying." there is worry deep in her pretty eyes as she wipes away his tears, and for the first time Mike realizes the warm wetness on his cheek and the taste of salt on his lips. His body suddenly rigid, he curses himself. How long had he been crying?



“Oh, yeah. Guess I am.”

El bites her lip and signs *I'm sorry* and Mike is taking her chin in his hands again. “El, it’s okay. I kind of...” he takes a deep breath, “I kind of cry all the time.”

“You do?” she asks and he takes her hand. He’s not sure he’s ready to share this revelation, this piece of him he’s kept buried.

“Ever... ever since I was little. I cried at like everything. When I would step on a bug by accident or a dog would die in a movie or Nancy would call me a name and her friends would make fun of my freckles. Troy and James used to call me a crybaby.”

“Mouth breathers.” she jokes under her breath, and it’s all he can do not bring their foreheads together. He’s swallowing those three words again, wondering how he got so lucky to be out in the rain that November night.

“Yeah, they were total douchebags. But I still cry a lot. Not as much, thank God, but like when I get really emotional I can’t get back to normal unless I cry. People call it being sensitive, I guess. It’s not really a good thing.” Mike speaks fast, hoping it will make it easier to tell her this. It doesn’t.

“Why not?” Her words are soft and kind if not shaky.

“I dunno. Being emotional- it isn’t really good. It can make you weak, you know?”

But El shakes her head. “You’re not weak.” she tells him, signing too. “You take care of me. You knew I was in trouble today.”

“That’s another part of it, I think. My instinct is always right.” Mike shrugs, but lets himself relax when she lays her head on his shoulder.

“I knew you would find me. I know you will always find me.” the line would cheesy coming from anyone else. But then they’re fingers are intertwined once again, and those three words are dancing on his tongue again. But now’s not the right time. They are way too vulnerable right now. Except that, Mike swallows, the quarry water is getting closer and closer every day.



“El?” he whispers her name after a few silent minutes.

“Yes?”

“Do you think that I’m weak? Because I’m so emotional?” If he was vulnerable in the seconds before, he might as well just peeled layers of skin off to show her.

And El doesn’t even hesitate. “You’re the strongest person I know. And you’re emotions, they- they” she searches for the phrase and her cute face scrunches up. He kisses her forehead. “They ground me. I know you will always know how I feel.”

Mike doesn’t tell her that she has basically hit the nail on the head of his empathic way of coping. It becomes a conversation for another time. They’ll talk about why he’s so emotional and why he always knows what she and everyone feels later. And she’ll understand, like she always does and he’ll kiss her like there’s no tomorrow because he’s run out of words of how *relieved* he is that somebody doesn’t argue with it, *she gets it*. But that’s for another rainy afternoon. This rainy afternoon, they sit with backs against the wall, cuddled against each other, making no attempt to move or be any less vulnerable.

He can always vulnerable with her. The girl he took out of the rain at the age of twelve, the one who sacrificed herself for the only family she’d ever known only four days older, the one who’d come back to him at the vulnerable age of thirteen. The girl that, at the age of sixteen, he’s fallen head over heels in love with.

And loving her, Mike is learning, like every emotion, is so much *more* than he anticipates; it’s the one feeling, the one soaring of his chest that does not leave him drained. Loving her is looking past her jagged edges but loving them because he has to love her, and he does love her, he won’t ever stop loving her as she is, as she will be. Loving her, loving all of her, is both deafeningly loud and hauntingly quiet, and when is with her, he can finally hear the storm for the thunder and for the rain.

“Mike?” El asks, fingers curling in his jacket.

He kisses the tip of her nose and she shivers. “Yeah?”



“I’m sorry I got snot all over you.”

Mike’s laughter echoes throughout the room and into the hall nextdoor where Dustin has set down a peace offering of four bags of McDonald’s, which include french fries for El as they’re soon to learn, in front of Lucas, successfully waking Will, who just had the best nap in the world, up. For right now, Mike can feel El smile and her emotions steadying, his emotions steadying with hers. He assures her it will wash, kissing her forehead when she makes him promise.

El may have just told him that he was the strongest person in the world to her, but looking at her, her eyes still red and her voice still shaking, he knows she’s his weakest point. But when Dustin comes in with her french fries and El’s eyes widen and she smiles because *food* and *junk food* - her favorite- he realizes something.

If this is his weakness, the beautiful girl who wipes his tears after crying her own and whose whole day gets better because of french fries, then strength?

That’s overrated.

#### **Author's Note:**

written for the lovely princess-kurama

track on the should i stay or should i go; mixtape-  
Iris/ Alex Goot and Chad Sugg